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The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day, in my view, was the most significant, interesting, and influential person in the history of American Catholicism. Certainly few others have received as wide and respected attention from persons outside the church, and none has matched her stature in the eyes of Catholics outside the United States. Within the American church, only a few individuals have become nationally prominent; even fewer have excited enough controversy to win followers and critics in all sections of the country. A handful of Catholics participated actively in the Catholic Worker apostolate she led for over forty-five years, but millions came to admire her witness, to be proud of her work, and to stand in awe of her dedication, her persistence, and her profound religious faith.

This assessment of Dorothy Day may be debatable, but one thing is certain: her fame will grow even greater now that she is gone. As long as she was alive, Catholics always had to hedge a bit in praising Dorothy Day; the question might arise why they and their church did not imitate her. Some carping criticism, or, more likely, a passing reference to her supposed utopianism, always had to accompany celebration of her goodness, reservations made awkward by the ordinariness of the woman and, in comparison with the Gospel, the modesty of her challenge. With death, the myth of Dorothy Day as Catholic heroine will no longer have to contest the reality either of Dorothy herself or of her church. She can be called a saint, a visionary, a prophet, knowing full well that only rather strange sorts think of saints as real persons whose lives might be models for their own.

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